

DEFEATING A SUPERIOR ENEMY

Frederick the Great, and the Battles of Rossbach & Leuthen

by Stu Rosenblatt

Prior to the onset World War I, Gen. Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the German General Staff, undertook a series of studies, based on the complete defeat, in fact, annihilation, by Hannibal, of the numerically superior forces of the Roman army, at the battle of Cannae, in 216 B.C. These Cannae studies were prepared for the General Staff to guide them against a potential set of enemies, should there be a war. One of the studies was a short analysis of the Battle of Leuthen, fought by Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, in the Winter of 1757, also against significantly superior forces.

Lyndon LaRouche has often cited this battle as a prime example of the method of creatively out-thinking, and outflanking one's enemy. The LaRouche political movement and its allies are now engaged in a life-and-death struggle against the dying British empire, which is also a seemingly superior force. In political warfare, as in military combat, it is essential to attack and crush your enemy on his most vulnerable flanks, until you annihilate him, or he surrenders.

This brief report will explore some of the lessons to be gleaned by examining the combined campaign waged by Frederick the Great, in 1757, against the French at Rossbach, and the Austrians at Leuthen.

Europe on the Eve of the Seven Years War

In 1756, prior to the outbreak of the Seven Years War (1756-63), the nations of Europe were being manipulated by Great Britain—itsself controlled increasingly by the scions of the British East India Company—



The victories of Frederick the Great, King of Prussia (1712-86) against the French at Rossbach, and the Austrians at Leuthen, are prime examples of creatively out-thinking and outflanking one's enemies.

FIGURE 1
Central Europe 1780



into a fratricidal war on the continent. Enemy coalitions were forming, and Frederick II, King of Prussia, found himself facing the armies of France, Russia, Austria, Sweden, Saxony, and a group of German principalities. Having no alternative, Frederick struck an alliance with the Hanoverian princes allied to the British Crown, and to Great Britain itself.

The British were orchestrating what would become the first world war, the precursor to all succeeding global conflicts, where other nations would be induced to fight and destroy each other, while the British expanded their empire. Frederick was merely a pawn in the British game. The alliance with Britain “was the worst decision I ever made,” Frederick later lamented.

Frederick received secret reports at The Hague in 1756 that the Russians, Austrians, and the French planned to attack him in the Spring of 1757. Other reports indicated that his enemies were cutting secret deals to slice up his empire once he was defeated. He had little choice but to form alliances and prepare for combat. He commented on the fact that his enemies were forced to round up enormous resources to defeat his famously well-trained and formidable army: “It must indeed be counted as one of the proudest memories of Prussian history, that the resources of 30 million people were considered inadequate to

overcome a mere 4 million.”

Frederick adopted an aggressive war posture from the outset. He decided to inaugurate hostilities and hoped to catch his adversaries by surprise. First, he planned a bold incursion into Saxony, and then Bohemia, contested areas with Austria, as early as the Summer of 1756. He would defeat Austria first, and then turn west, and confront the French. After disabling his initial adversaries, he would face a likely Russian invasion from the East. Although the war would not unfold quite to his specifications, Frederick’s original strategy was to attack and hit the flanks.

The success of this bold plan rested on Frederick’s appreciation of the principle of flanking attacks, both in grand strategy and tactical planning. To bolster his understanding, Frederick pored over ancient military history to find precedents that would guide him. He had studied the Battle of Cannae, and he was sure his enemies had also, so he sought other campaigns that would allow him to outflank his opponents, by surprise.

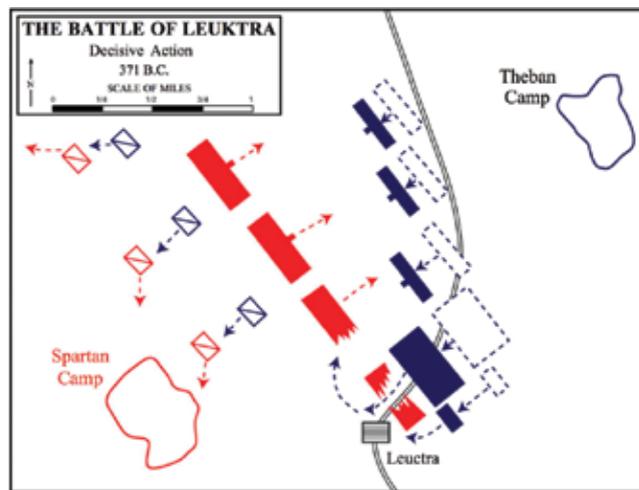
Epaminondas and the Battle of Leuctra

In tactical preparation for the war, Frederick pored over accounts of ancient battles, and discovered a campaign, and a military leader that supplied the strategy he needed. He seized on the famous war of the Thebans against a superior enemy, the army of Sparta, in 371 B.C.

Following the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.), Sparta emerged as the most powerful city-state on the Greek peninsula. Sparta then engaged in a power struggle with Persia for control of Greece and the Near East. Thebes benefited from Persian largesse in its own rise to power, and to quell Theban opposition, Sparta invaded Boetia with a large army in 371 B.C. Most of the Theban leaders and generals rushed to appease the Spartans, but a great leader, Epaminondas, opposed this cowardice. He demanded that Thebes fight, and prevailed against the other power brokers, although they remained skeptical of success. De-

FIGURE 2

The Battle of Leuctra



In the Battle of Leuctra (371 B.C.), which informed Frederick's strategy in the Seven Years War, a numerically smaller force of Thebans, under the command of Epaminondas, defeated a superior force of Spartans. Central to the victory was the Oblique Order of battle employed by the Thebans to crush the right flank of the Spartans and lead to the rout of their army. This Oblique Order was used by Frederick in several of his battles in the 1757 campaign.

spite their lack of enthusiasm, Epaminondas put forward a masterful plan to defeat the Spartan invaders.

The Theban army was approximately half the size of the Spartan force. Epaminondas had to devise a strategy to crush the invaders. Prior to the battle, Epaminondas defied the conventional deployment of forces in a wily effort to outflank the enemy. Traditionally, both armies lined up in phalanxes across from one another. Each phalanx would deploy 12 men deep, and engage in direct combat with the rival phalanx. Superior fighting prowess would determine the outcome.

Epaminondas, instead, took his best fighting forces, and positioned them on his left flank, in a heavy alignment directly across from the right wing of the Spartans. His men were deployed 50 deep, as opposed to the conventional 12-man depth (Figure 2). He then staggered the remainder of his army at an oblique angle next to, and descending away from the enlarged left flank. Prior to the battle, he ordered the weaker troops in this "Oblique Order" (see below) to withdraw gradually in a "refused flank," and await the success or failure of the left flank.

When fighting commenced, Epaminondas' left flank surged against the startled Spartan right wing, breaking

through the line, and sending them into headlong retreat. He then launched the refused wing against the disorganized remnant of the Spartan army, completely crushing them. He won an unexpected, decisive victory over the superior and much-feared Spartan enemy at Leuctra.

After this battle, Epaminondas repeated the same maneuver in a follow-up conflict with the Spartans, and was victorious again. Unfortunately, this time, it cost him his life. Epaminondas had been downplayed over the centuries, but his successful battle tactics inspired Frederick the Great in the opening battles of the Seven Years War.

In his *Principes Généraux*, completed in 1748, Frederick sketched his general philosophy of war, and wrote about the Battle of Leuctra: "The Army was not to shrink from an encounter with a superior enemy, for 'these are the occasions on which my Oblique Order of battle can be employed to great effect. You refuse one wing to the enemy, but you reinforce the attacking wing, with which you deliver the assault against a single wing of the enemy forces, taking them in flank. An army of 100,000 men, outflanked in this way, may be beaten by 30,000, because the issue is decided so quickly.'"¹

Frederick Invades Saxony: The War Begins

The Seven Years War began in 1756 with various naval and other engagements, highlighted by the Battle of Minorca. The land war commenced with Frederick II's preemptive march into Saxony. He caught the Saxon army not fully mobilized, but he quickly encountered sections of the Austrian army that proved a much stronger adversary than he had anticipated. After an extended struggle, Frederick prevailed at the Battle of Lobositz in October 1756. The results were not conclusive, and the combatants retired to their Winter quarters, to plan for the Spring campaigns.

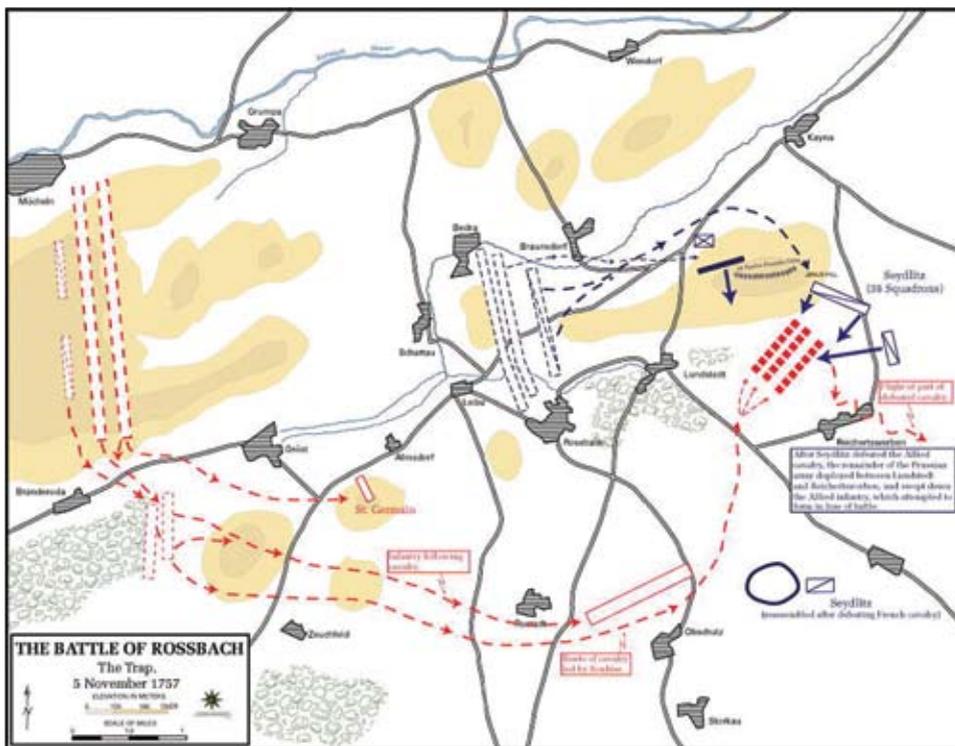
Over the Winter, France and Russia formally struck up an alliance against Prussia, and joined Austria in preparing to attack Frederick, who was now officially opposed on all fronts.

Brazenly undeterred, Frederick resumed the offensive in the Spring of 1757. He achieved a victory at the Battle of Prague, but the campaign against Austria bogged down, and was stalemated by Summer.

Frederick shifted direction and prepared to attack

1. Christopher Duffy, *The Military Life of Frederick the Great* (New York: Atheneum, 1986), p. 78.

FIGURE 3
The Battle of Rossbach



Frederick meets the Allied army (France and German princes) at Rossbach on Nov. 5, 1757, after a forced march from the east. Prussian General Seydlitz initially defeats the cavalry of the numerically superior Allied force on the left flank. The Allied army then marches in a hastily organized set of columns directly toward the Prussian infantry, which reforms its lines to entrap the Allied army. The Prussians fall on the Allied infantry on both their flanks, routing them, and inflicting severe casualties.

France in the West, before they were fully mobilized for war. Once his western flank was secured, he would return to Austria, and attack in Lusatia. He knew this was imperative, as he would soon be facing Russia and Sweden from the East, enemies he knew would pose a serious challenge.

With this backdrop, Frederick divided his army, leaving a force of 41,000 to hold the gains in Austria, while he would head up a 20,000-man invasion force against oncoming French troops in the West.

Despite being outnumbered, Frederick remained on the offensive. He knew he possessed the superior army. What was required was the nerve and brains to triumph.

Rosbach and Leuthen

In the late Summer of 1757, Frederick marched from Dresden toward Leipzig, picking up pieces of his

army as he went. A month later, after hard marching, he confronted the allied armies of France and the German princes near the town of Rossbach. The Allies had 41,000 troops between them, while Frederick had half that number. But Frederick knew his army was better trained, capable of quick marching and maneuvering, and possessed a superior ability to deploy battlefield artillery.

The Battle of Rossbach commenced on Nov. 5, and Frederick defeated an initial attack of Allied forces, by employing a double envelopment of his cavalry (Figure 3). He then deployed a portion of his remaining troops in a modified Oblique Order formation, and lured the French into a headlong attack against two wings of his army. He had pre-positioned these wings opposite the French attack at an angle. He fell upon the French from both sides and delivered a

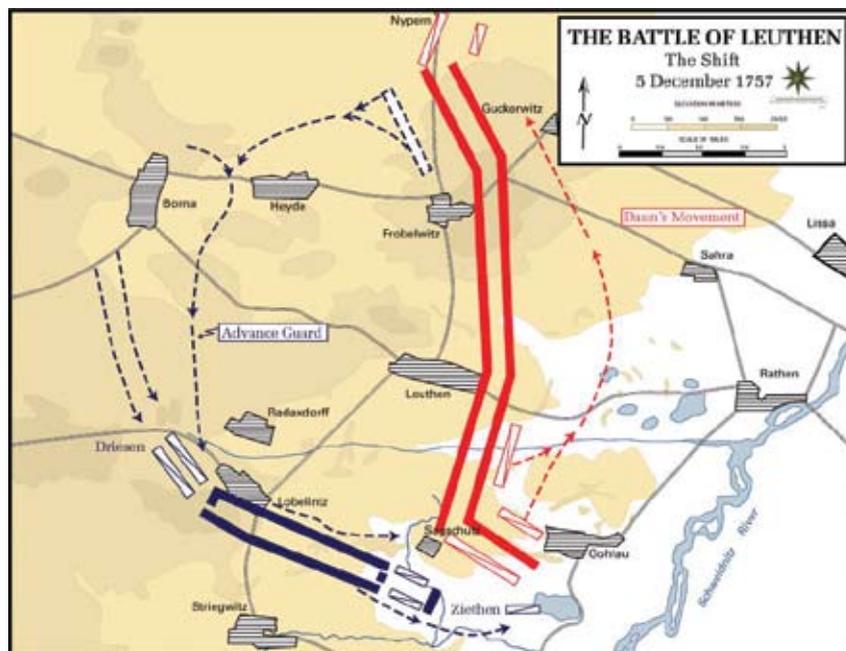
massive defeat. The French-led Allied army lost 10,000 troops, nearly 25% of its force, while Frederick sustained but 550 casualties! Rossbach was so conclusive a victory, that it ended any French incursions for the remainder of the Seven Years War.

Frederick did not linger to savor his victory. He immediately turned his army east, and began a fast march back toward Lusatia, and then on to Silesia. He wanted to relieve the army that had been occupying the territory, which had been slowly picked apart by the Austrians. He then sought to attack Austria before Winter.

His march east was impressive. He allowed one day for rest out of four, and his troops were instructed to forage off the land, to conserve supplies. As he marched, he also gathered together the scattered portions of his army.

Many of these troops had become demoralized under the weight of the Austrian attacks, and Frederick

FIGURE 4
The Battle of Leuthen: The Shift



In the opening of the battle (Winter 1757), Frederick feints an attack on the right wing of the Austrian troops, which is deployed on a four-mile north-south line, down to Sagschutz. Frederick engages the Austrians at Borna, leaving 40 squadrons in a “refused wing” opposite Radaxdorff. He deploys the majority of his troops in a long march south, who then wheel and attack the surprised Austrian left wing, from the South. The Prussians deploy in Oblique Order, routing the Austrians, who are forced back toward Leuthen village.

quickly raised their morale by regaling them with stories of the glorious victory at Rossbach.

Finally, in late November 1757, he reached Parchwitz, and positioned a fighting force of 35,000 battle-hardened Brandenburgers, Pomeranians, and Magdeburgers near the Oder River outside of Breslau. He aimed to take the Austrian army by surprise, before it had been able to dig in and prepare for his attack. Sure enough, the enemy army had not reconnoitered Frederick’s approach, and was caught flat-footed near the village of Leuthen.

Prior to the great battle, Frederick delivered his famous Parchwitz Address to his assembled troops, confronting them with the peril of their situation, and urged them on, “to conquer or die.”

However, Frederick had badly underestimated the size of the enemy forces. He thought he was fighting 40,000, when, in fact, the Austrian army was comprised of over 65,000 men. To complicate the situation, the battle was fought with light snow on the ground—not

conducive to war fighting in that age.

The conflict began early in the morning of Dec. 5, with Frederick personally leading his entire army in two long columns, flanked by cavalry and artillery on either side (**Figure 4**). The Austrian army was strung out in a line, nearly four miles long, over a series of small hills, as he approached from the West. Frederick aimed a small portion of his army directly at the right wing of the Austrians and attacked them outside the village of Borne. He defeated the startled enemy handily, and continued his feint toward the main body of the Austrian right flank.

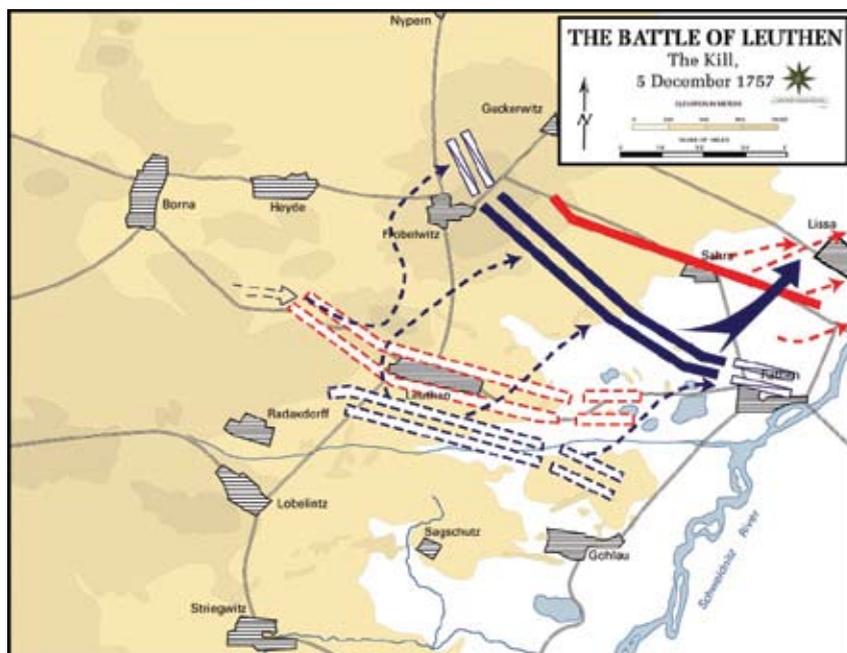
Believing that the Prussians would attack this wing, the Austrians quickly redeployed their reserves to bolster it. They prepared to fall upon Frederick in a classic Cannae maneuver, and crush him from both sides. Frederick had taken the Austrian intention into his calculations, and quickly marched the bulk of his army in a different direction.

He separated his army into two columns. A smaller force of 40 squadrons and cavalry was stationed facing the right flank and center of the enemy in a refused wing. They would not participate in the initial attack, but would be available either to join in a second engagement, or cover a retreat.

The second column of Frederick’s army broke off and wheeled right, heading east, parallel to the extended Austrian lines, but hidden from the enemy by small hills and foliage. Frederick personally led this second wing at a deliberate pace, to maintain order and ready it for a further maneuver.

As they marched passed the unsuspecting Austrian left wing, Frederick ordered them to march east-south-east and fall into line opposite, and perpendicular to the far side of the exposed Austrian flank (**Figure 5**). The main body of the infantry set to attack the enemy was arrayed in a staggered line of battalions extending back at 50-pace intervals, in a textbook Oblique Order of battle. The king ordered his best companies of advance guard to lead the assault on the utterly shocked enemy flank.

FIGURE 5
Battle of Leuthen: The Kill



The hastily re-formed Austrian troops grouped around Leuthen village. The majority of the Prussian force in the South continued their northward onslaught, and dislodged the Austrian troops in short order. The Austrians flee toward Lissa, leaving Frederick with a total victory over the troops of Charles of Lorraine.

The entire Austrian army was facing west, when the Prussian infantry fell on it with a punishing assault from the South. They put up an initial resistance but were forced back under the weight of Frederick’s army.

Realizing that he had been totally surprised, Prince Charles of Lorraine, the Austrian commander, hurriedly ordered the bulk of his army to reform facing Frederick’s onrushing troops. The Austrian army was now positioned south of Leuthen village, in a staggered line that in some areas was 40 men deep and unable to move. This provided an excellent target for Prussian artillery, and for Frederick’s refused wing of 40 squadrons, that suddenly found itself ready to attack the disorganized new Austrian right wing.

The Prussians now hammered the confused Austrian army from both sides, putting the enemy to rout. Frederick’s troops, exhausted by the month-long march and intense day-long battle, pursued the fleeing Austrian army, but not with the zeal required for a total annihilation. However, the victory was complete and startling.

Casualty figures told only part of the story. The Prussian army suffered 6,400 injuries, the majority

being light wounds, while the Austrian force took 22,000 casualties, including 12,000 soldiers captured, and 10,000 dead or wounded. This comprised nearly one-third of the Austrian army!

Postscript

General von Schlieffen studied the battle intensively, and compared it to the Carthaginian victory over Terentius Varro, the Roman general at Cannae, Schlieffen’s yardstick for total victory of inferior troops over a superior enemy. He concluded that the Prussian army did not have enough troops at hand to turn both flanks of the Austrian army. The oblique disposition of troops on the left and right by Frederick the Great replaced the double envelopment of Hannibal against the Romans, and was still very effective.

Von Schlieffen praised Frederick for “turning the retreat on the left flank into a rout by pursuit. [But,] [t]he disproportion of strength was too great, the forces too unequal. Leithen could only be a mutilated Cannae.... If,

during the further pursuit [by the Prussian generals], they could have acted with more ‘vivacité’ and sat ‘closer on the heels of the enemy,’ the results would have been greater but were still considerable.

“Of the proud Imperial army which crossed the Queiss at Lauban with 90,000, scarcely one fourth left the soil of Silesia and returned over the frontier of Bohemia in the greatest dejection and discouragement. This came pretty close to extermination.”

Lyndon LaRouche has employed the same method in political combat. We find ourselves in similar circumstances, deploying seemingly inferior forces against an apparently stronger enemy. The idea of successful flank attacks is identical to the triumph of “weak forces” in physical science or Classical art. Both begin with the development of new creative ideas.

Our enemy is now decaying, rotting from the inside of a collapsing economy. LaRouche is attacking that weakness with the unleashing of a campaign to win the passage of Glass-Steagall, thereby reasserting the primacy of the Constitutional principle of the General Welfare and Federal credit.